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EDUCATION
THE ELITE COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO CAN'T READ BOOKS

To read a book in college, it helps to have read a book in high school.

By **Rose Horowitch**
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Nicholas Dames has taught Literature Humanities, Columbia University's required great-books course, since 1998. He loves the job, but it has changed. Over the past decade, students have become overwhelmed by the reading. College kids have never read everything they're assigned, of course, but this feels different. Dames's students now seem bewildered by the thought of finishing multiple books a semester. His colleagues have noticed the same problem. Many students no longer arrive at college—even at highly selective, elite colleges—prepared to read books.

This development puzzled Dames until one day during the fall 2022 semester, when a first-year student came to his office hours to share how challenging she had found the early assignments. Lit Hum often requires students to read a book, sometimes a very long and dense one, in just a week or two. But the student told Dames that, at her public high school, she had never been required to read an entire book. She had been assigned excerpts, poetry, and news articles, but not a single book cover to cover.

[Read: Why kids aren't falling in love with reading]

"My jaw dropped," Dames told me. The anecdote helped explain the change he was seeing in his students: It's not that they don't want to do the reading. It's that they don't know how. Middle and high schools have stopped asking them to.

in 1979, Martha Maxwell, an influential literacy scholar, wrote, "Every generation, at some point, discovers that students cannot read as well as they would like or as well as professors expect." Dames, who studies the history of the novel, acknowledged the longevity of the complaint. "Part of me is always tempted to be very skeptical about the idea that this is something new," he said.

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And yet, "I think there is a phenomenon that we're noticing that I'm also hesitant to ignore." Twenty years ago, Dames's classes had no problem engaging in sophisticated discussions of *Pride and Prejudice* one week and *Crime and Punishment* the next. Now his students tell him up front that the reading load feels impossible. It's not just the frenetic pace; they struggle to attend to small details while keeping track of the overall plot.

No comprehensive data exist on this trend, but the majority of the 33 professors I spoke with relayed similar experiences. Many had discussed the change at faculty meetings and in conversations with fellow instructors. Anthony Grafton, a Princeton historian, said his students arrive on campus with a narrower vocabulary and less understanding of language than they used to have. There are always students who "read insightfully and easily and write beautifully," he said, "but they are now more exceptions." Jack Chen, a Chinese-literature professor at the University of Virginia, finds his students "shutting down" when confronted with ideas they don't understand; they're less able to persist through a challenging text than they used to be. Daniel Shore, the chair of Georgetown's English department, told me that his students have trouble staying focused on even a sonnet.

Failing to complete a 14-line poem without succumbing to distraction suggests one familiar explanation for the decline in reading aptitude: smartphones. Teenagers are constantly tempted by their devices, which inhibits their preparation for the rigors of college coursework—then they get to college, and the distractions keep flowing. "It's changed expectations about what's worthy of attention," Daniel Willingham, a psychologist at UVA, told me. "Being bored has become unnatural." Reading books, even for pleasure, can't compete with TikTok, Instagram, YouTube. In 1976, about 40 percent of high-school seniors said they had read at least six books for fun in the previous year, compared with 11.5 percent who hadn't read any. By 2022, those percentages had flipped.

But middle- and high-school kids appear to be encountering fewer and fewer books in the classroom as well. For more than two decades, new educational initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core emphasized informational texts and standardized tests. Teachers at many schools shifted from books to short informational passages, followed by questions about the author's main idea—mimicking the format of standardized reading-comprehension tests. Antero Garcia, a Stanford education professor, is completing his term as vice president of the National Council of Teachers of English and previously taught at a public school in Los Angeles. He told me that the new guidelines were intended to help students make clear arguments and synthesize texts. But "in doing so, we've sacrificed young people's ability to grapple with long-form texts in general."

Mike Szkolka, a teacher and an administrator who has spent almost two decades in Boston and New York schools, told me that excerpts have replaced books across grade levels. "There's no testing skill that can be related to … Can you sit down and read Tolstoy? " he said. And if a skill is not easily measured, instructors and district leaders have little incentive to teach it. Carol Jago, a literacy expert who crisscrosses the country helping teachers design curricula, says that educators tell her they've stopped teaching the novels they've long revered, such as *My Ántonia* and *Great Expectations*. The pandemic, which scrambled syllabi and moved coursework online, accelerated the shift away from teaching complete works.

In a recent EdWeek Research Center survey of about 300 third-to-eighth-grade educators, only 17 percent said they primarily teach whole texts. An additional 49 percent combine whole texts with anthologies and excerpts. But nearly a quarter of respondents said that books are no longer the center of their curricula. One public-high-school teacher in Illinois told me that she used to structure her classes around books but now focuses on skills, such as how to make good decisions. In a unit about leadership, students read parts of Homer's *Odyssey* and supplement it with music, articles, and TED Talks. (She assured me that her students read at least two full texts each semester.) An Advanced Placement English Literature teacher in Atlanta told me that the class used to read 14 books each year. Now they're down to six or seven.

"It's not like I can say, 'Okay, over the next three weeks, I expect you to read The Iliad,' because they're not going to do it."

Private schools, which produce a disproportionate share of elite college students, seem to have been slower to shift away from reading complete volumes—leading to what Dames describes as a disconcerting reading-skills gap among incoming freshmen. But private schools are not immune to the trend. At the prep school that I graduated from five years ago, I took a Jane Austen course my senior year. I read only a single Austen novel.

The issue that Dames and other professors have observed is distinct from the problem at community colleges and nonselective universities, where some students arrive with literacy and comprehension deficits that can leave them unable to complete collegiate courses. High-achieving students at exclusive schools like Columbia can decode words and sentences. But they struggle to muster the attention or ambition required to immerse themselves in a substantial text.

Faced with this predicament, many college professors feel they have no choice but to assign less reading and lower their expectations. Victoria Kahn, who has taught literature at UC Berkeley since 1997, used to assign 200 pages each week. Now she assigns less than half of that. "I don't do the whole *Iliad*. I assign books of *The Iliad*. I hope that some of them will read the whole thing," Kahn told me. "It's not like I can say, 'Okay, over the next three weeks, I expect you to read The Iliad,' because they're not going to do it."

Andrew Delbanco, a longtime American-studies professor at Columbia, now teaches a seminar on short works of American prose instead of a survey course on literature. The Melville segment used to include *Moby-Dick*; now his students make do with *Billy Budd*, *Benito Cereno*, and "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*." There are some benefits—short works allow more time to focus on "the intricacies and subtleties of language," Delbanco told me—and he has made peace with the change. "One has to adjust to the times," he said.

The Columbia instructors who determine the Lit Hum curriculum decided to trim the reading list for the current school year. (It had been growing in recent years, even while students struggled with the reading, as new books by nonwhite authors were added.) Like Delbanco, some see advantages to teaching fewer books. Even the best-prepared students have probably been skimming some of their Lit Hum assignments for years.

Joseph Howley, the program's chair, said he'd rather students miss out on some of the classics—Crime and Punishment is now off the list—but read the remaining texts in greater depth. And, crucially, the change will give professors more time to teach students how they expect them to read.

But it's not clear that instructors can foster a love of reading by thinning out the syllabus. Some experts I spoke with attributed the decline of book reading to a shift in values rather than in skill sets. Students can still read books, they argue—they're just choosing not to. Students today are far more concerned about their job prospects than they were in the past. Every year, they tell Howley that, despite enjoying what they learned in Lit Hum, they plan to instead get a degree in something more useful for their career.

The same factors that have contributed to declining enrollment in the humanities might lead students to spend less time reading in the courses they do take. A 2023 survey of Harvard seniors found that they spend almost as much time on jobs and extracurriculars as they do on academics. And thanks to years of grade inflation (in a recent report, 79 percent of Harvard grades were in the A range), college kids can get by without doing all of their assigned work.

Whether through atrophy or apathy, a generation of students is reading fewer books. They might read more as they age—older adults are the most voracious readers—but the data are not encouraging. The American Time Use Survey shows that the overall pool of people who read books for pleasure has shrunk over the past two decades. A couple of professors told me that their students see reading books as akin to listening to vinyl records—something that a small subculture may still enjoy, but that's mostly a relic of an earlier time.

The economic survival of the publishing industry requires an audience willing and able to spend time with an extended piece of writing. But as readers of a literary magazine will surely appreciate, more than a venerable industry is at stake. Books can cultivate a sophisticated form of empathy, transporting a reader into the mind of someone who lived hundreds of years ago, or a person who lives in a radically different context from the reader's own. "A lot of contemporary ideas of empathy are built on identification, identity politics," Kahn, the Berkeley professor, said. "Reading is more complicated than that, so it enlarges your sympathies."

Yet such benefits require staying with a character through their journey; they cannot be approximated by reading a five- or even 30-page excerpt. According to the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf, so-called deep reading—sustained immersion in a text—stimulates a number of valuable mental habits, including critical thinking and self-reflection, in ways that skimming or reading in short bursts does not.

Over and over, the professors I spoke with painted a grim picture of young people's reading habits. (The historian Adrian Johns was one dissenter, but allowed, "My experience is a bit unusual because the University of Chicago is, like, the last bastion of people who do read things.") For years, Dames has asked his first-years about their favorite book. In the past, they cited books such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*.

Now, he says, almost half of them cite young-adult books. Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series seems to be a particular favorite.

I can imagine worse preparations for the trials, and thrills, of Lit Hum. Riordan's series, although full of frothy action and sometimes sophomoric humor, also cleverly engages in a literary exercise as old as the Western canon: spinning new adventures for the petulant gods and compromised heroes of Greek mythology. But of course there is a reason that, despite millennia of reinterpretations, we've never forgotten the originals. To understand the human condition, and to appreciate humankind's greatest achievements, you still need to read *The Iliad*—all of it.

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Due to an editing error, this article initially misstated the year Nicholas Dames started teaching Literature Humanities. This article appears in the November 2024 print edition with the headline "The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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